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RITSCHL'S CRITERION OF RELIGIOUS TRUTH

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There seems to be no extended treatment in the literature of Ritschl's conception of the criterion of truth. And yet a man's criterion of truth is the key to the understanding of all his thought. If we know that a man will view as true only the laws of formal logic and what can be cogently deduced by these laws from rational principles, then we know all we need to know about the type of religious construction of which that man will be capable. Again, if we know that he will believe nothing that he cannot verify in sense experience, we are already in possession of the main outline of his thought, beyond which he cannot wander and remain coherent. We know too that a theologian who approaches the Scriptures with the assumption of their infallibility, or with any other dogmatic presupposition, has a criterion that will drive him to certain conclusions and effectually bar him from certain others. Some criterion predetermines all thought-construction that is not merely haphazard.

It was the great merit of Ritschl to have been aware of the need for clearness on this fundamental matter. It may be that he did not succeed in attaining it to our satisfaction or his own; but it has been his misfortune that what he has said has not been adequately evaluated.

The objective study of this side of Ritschl's thought is rendered unusually difficult by two more or less current presuppositions: first, the very term Ritschlianism suggests that our theologian's system was a rather closely knit, logical unity, a system in the strict sense; secondly, the center of Ritschl's thought on the criterion of truth is commonly supposed to be the value-judgment. As a matter of fact, each of these presuppositions is misleading.

It is far from accurate to think that Ritschl had one consistent and unified theological view. We are indebted for a detailed

knowledge of the fluid condition of Ritschl's thought to Fabricius,¹ who has compared the texts of the successive editions of all the important works. This typical case of German *Kleinarbeit* affords us the best material extant for a study of the many changes in the thinking of our theologian. His early transition from the Tübingen school to an independent position is well known. But he did not stop growing. Fabricius rightly says that "he who in the future undertakes to write the history [of theology] ought not to pass heedlessly by the reconstruction in Ritschl's thinking from 1874 to 1889. . . . There is in the development of Ritschl's theory of fundamental principles a constantly increasing retrenchment of ethics in favor of metaphysics; a retrenchment of ethical rationalism in favor of an orthodoxy that believes in revelation; and occasionally also a shifting of the ground of our knowledge from the ideal of the Kingdom of God to the historically given life of Christ" (pp. 134, 136). Ritschl was constantly becoming less of an apriorist, less of a Kantian, and more of a believer in the orthodox faith. His tendency was away from the abstract and general toward the concrete and historically given.

With reference to the second presupposition, so much is true, that the emphasis on value-judging has been a suggestive aspect of Ritschl's work. But the term has practically disappeared from contemporary neo-Ritschlian discussion in Germany; and for Ritschl himself it had a status by no means unambiguous. In any case, whatever value-judgments may signify for him, they are not central. In his chief work, *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*,² he does indeed lay stress on values, but not so much stress as he lays on other ideas, such as the community, the revelation in Christ, the Kingdom of God. He wrote a three-volume polemic against pietism without reference to value-judgments; he could hardly have done this had he viewed them as of central significance. Nor did he originate the theory. There are conflicting views as to the source of its prominence in the Ritschlian movement. Fabricius attributes it to Julius Kaftan; Otto Ritschl, son of our

¹ Caius Fabricius, *Die Entwicklung in Ritschl's Theologie von 1874-1889* (Tübingen, 1909).

² Hereafter referred to by the abbreviation *RV* (third German edition).

theologian, in his pamphlet on *Werturteile*, asserts that Wilhelm Herrmann, of Marburg, was the first to use it; so also does Boutroux in his *Religion and Science*. But on the personal authority of Professor Herrmann, to whom the writer owes a debt of gratitude for assistance and direction in the study of Ritschl, it may be stated that the use of the term by Ritschlians is not due primarily to Ritschl, Kaftan, or Herrmann, but to the influence of Rudolf Herrmann Lotze, their common source. Ritschl's exposition popularized a borrowed idea. We shall later consider the place of that idea in his system.

What then was his central logical motif? Ritschl often and explicitly states his views as to the nature of theology. He says repeatedly¹ that it is a science: "It is not devotion, but as science, is disinterested knowledge." It aims to discover laws; it must be a self-consistent system, so that no theological definition can be formulated save in the connection of the whole system. Like other sciences, it has a limited subject-matter, which, in its case, is the faith of the Christian community that it stands in a relation to God essentially conditioned by forgiveness of sins. Christianity as experienced in the community was for Ritschl "given" as true in much the sense in which Kant viewed natural science as "given." Hence, the task of theology is simply to formulate faith; theological theory has value only in so far as it corresponds to faith;² nothing should be incorporated into dogmatics that cannot be used in the pulpit and in Christian life.³ Theology, then, is disinterested, objective science, the subject-matter of which is the faith of the Christian community, and the logical method of which is that of all other sciences.

But in many other discussions, especially in the latter part of his life, he seems to deny to theology a scientific character. An objective account of Christianity, he tells us, is neither exhaustive nor satisfactory; indeed, the more objectively the truths of Christianity are narrated, the nearer we are to skepticism.⁴ Objectivity, in the sense of an even momentary indifference to the Christian religion, serves to undermine Christianity. Christian faith sur-

¹ RV, I, 616; II, 1, 4; III, 2, 15, 17, 203.

³ RV, III, 573.

² *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, First Series, p. 133 (in 1869).

⁴ RV, III, 34, 187.

vived scholasticism, Roman and Protestant, not because of, but despite, its scientific doctrine of God. When theology becomes scientific, as in the Eastern church, it is not Christian, but a secularization of Christianity. True Christian theology is not essentially scientific; it is essentially religious. A Christian theologian must genuinely belong to the Christian community¹ and must start from the presupposition of the truth of the community-faith in Jesus.

If these two formally contradictory standpoints are to be reconciled, it can only be on the assumption that while theology has a scientific form, that form is something foreign, nonessential, literally *pro forma*. The truth of theology lies in its content, the "religious knowledge" or "confidence" of the community, the social experience of God in Christ by Christians living in the stream of the historical tradition.

This suggests as the sole criterion of a religious truth the fact that it is believed or experienced by the Christian community. Not the *consensus gentium*, but the *consensus ecclesiae* becomes the guide to truth. This is indeed Ritschl's most characteristic criterion. Not an individualistic, subjective theory of values is his great contribution, but a social, objective interpretation of the community. As between James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* or *Pragmatism*, and Royce's *Problem of Christianity*, he is much nearer Royce, in spite of Ritschlian anti-metaphysic. Ritschl's interest is in the Beloved Community rather than in cash values.

If we examine the details of Ritschl's system more closely, we shall find a great many cases in which this community-criterion is employed. The entire *Geschichte des Pietismus* is a protest against pietistic individualism in favor of the norms and traditions of the community. No subjective experience of repentance with the good old Lutheran *terrores conscientiae*, and no conversion (woe to him who, with "Pietists and Methodists," insists that this event must be dated!) carries with it the guaranty of its own validity. Much less can objective reflection establish or overthrow that validity. The experience can be guaranteed as Christian and as

¹ RV, III, 1-4, "Unterricht in der christl. Religion," 206.

true only in its relation to the faith of the community imparted to its members through education in the Christian tradition.

Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung is in large measure a polemic against Thomasius, Philippi, Hofmann, and Lipsius, who took as their starting-point the religious need of the individual, and made subjective experience the logical foundation for the truths of theology.¹ These men might pass as Ritschlians, if the value-judgment were Ritschlianism; for they found ultimate religious truth in their own satisfactory and worthwhile experience. Ritschl's objection to them is not based on the consideration that such individualism is not valuable, but on the fact that it is not social. He rejects the idea that the individual experience of one or two theological professors shall pass as the standard for the church² and he points out that even among professors there are differences in experience. Theology must have a churchly, a community, character; and it must be saved from fanatical individualism by turning to its objective historic source, which is a spiritual movement common to all, founded by Jesus Christ.³

In this connection, the treatment of the *testimonium spiritus sancti* is very instructive. The doctrine is one of the most precious historical treasures of the church. How does Ritschl treat this item of the community-faith? He tells us that the doctrine as formulated is untrue, because it views the divine Spirit as active, and the human as passive; whereas Kant teaches and all well-trained philosophers understand that the essential characteristic of the human personality is self-conscious activity. This argumentation moves in the scientific thought-forms of Lotzeanism, not in the religious realm of community-faith. But this is incidental. His fundamental objection to the doctrine runs as follows: The Spirit is really never given to the individual as such, but only to the individual as part of the community. The Holy Spirit, God's knowledge of himself, and the knowledge of God in the community are different names for the same fact. This view identifies the witness of the Spirit with the social consciousness of the community. In other words, he modifies the traditional doctrine in the interest of his social criterion.

¹ RV, I, 641 f.; II, 7.

² RV, I, 642.

³ RV, II, 7 f.

In the many attacks on mysticism, in the definition of revelation as any complex of ideas held as true by a religious community, in the assumption that community-tradition preserves accurately the portrait of Jesus, in the teaching that community-revelation is except in the case of Jesus unconditionally superior to the individual conscience and is not to be proved or disproved by the use of reason, in the interpretation of Christ's existence for us in terms of the Christ-ideal in the community, and in the later acceptance of the actual present personal existence of Christ with God as a "mystery"—in all these characteristic teachings Ritschl makes the community the ultimate norm, in general emphasizing in his earlier writings the community-experience, in his later writings the community-doctrine.

This criterion Ritschl employs in connection with his exposition of nearly every doctrine. He recognizes that the view has its difficulties and seeks to face them. How, for instance, can the community's faith in Christ be the criterion, when the community has not always been faithful? He would reply that the community, divided though it be, tragical though its history, and sinful many of its empirical members, is somehow a real unity, the body of Christ. Wherever the Word and sacraments are, there is the visible church, token of the presence of God, *extra quam nulla salus*. And so even the legal forms of the church, which in his earlier life he had tended to view as belonging to the "world," he came to regard as essential to the community; and he made it a matter of principle to submit to the formulated doctrinal requirements of the Lutheran church as he understood them.

The famous rejection of metaphysics is not based primarily on intellectual grounds, but on the feeling that metaphysical method can never lead us to know the God revealed to the Christian community. The Hegelian Absolute is not a Rock of Ages; and conversely, the fact that God is will, love, personality, is given to us in the Christian revelation and can never be proved from another source. Christian theism is our only hope for a coherent world-view; yet it is not true because it is coherent and scientific, but solely because it is Christian. In the third edition of *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* he came to believe that Christianity would

be true on its own account, even if the Christian idea of God were not used to explain the world—that is, even if no relation were thought between God and the world. The first edition had stated that such a course would make theology impossible.¹ So stalwart is his loyalty to the community that he is thus willing, if need be, to face the consequences of deism and a complete metaphysical and logical dualism not unlike the doctrine of the twofold truth. At the same time he recognizes that the community-faith has always posited a God-world relation which leads to a conception of the immanence of God in the world.²

It is first in this context that one can understand Ritschl's attitude toward value-judging. Without question, he holds that all religion consists of value-judgments, which function to produce "blessedness" in us.³ But Ritschl does not hold that what seems to us most valuable, most practical, most blessed, is therefore true. He is nearer to the intellectualistic position that only the true can be truly satisfactory. Religion is blessedness but a blessedness that finds its basis and firm hold in the objective existence of a Christian community, bearer and transmitter of the revelation of God in Christ. Sometimes, indeed, he seems to take a universal and extra-Christian standpoint, when he makes the self-evaluation of the human spirit the fundamental fact.⁴ But he specifically asserts that the ethical proof of Christianity can only succeed when undertaken from the standpoint of the community of believers.⁵ All value-judgments of the Christian religion are a community affair, a means of mutual understanding among Christians.⁶ There is no way of convincing a Buddhist or a Mohammedan of the superiority of Christianity. In a word, Christianity is not true because it is valuable; but values are significant because they are Christian. This is meant, of course, not in the interests of obscurantist traditionalism, but in the interests of religious life.

¹ *RV*, III, 213 (3d ed.), compared with III, 191 f., (1st ed.).

² *RV*, III, 284, 353, 205, 116, 224, 201.

³ *RV*, III, 376.

⁵ *RV*, III, 8.

⁴ *RV*, III, 213, 201, 25.

⁶ *Theologie Metaphysik*, p. 39.

Whatever is believed by the Christian community, expressing the social aspect of Christianity and its character as a historic movement founded by Jesus Christ, is true and valuable for that community. Christian truth is not accessible to others. Such is Ritschl's outstanding attitude toward the problem of truth.

But we find many passages in which Ritschl is clearly not using the community-faith as his criterion of religious truth. We have already mentioned that one ground for rejecting the traditional *testimonium* was that it treated the self as passive. Here he assumes a criterion which is somehow immanent in the reason as such. Again, we find him rejecting mysticism because it lacks ethical sanity—it denies the will its birthright in religion; whereas the human self is agent, not patient, and in personal life reality pertains to spiritual causality alone.¹ Again, the Kingdom of God is not merely a community-belief; but, as the goal of God, the world, and the community, it is an ethical ideal of universal love in which all active selves gladly co-operate; and this ideal is true and valid precisely because of its ethical character. Another frequent teaching in the pages of Ritschl is that Christianity is the means to mastery of the world; in the first edition of *Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* he taught consistently that Christianity is true because it gives us this power to overcome worldly obstacles and temptations. In later editions such passages are withdrawn in favor of the absolute supremacy of the Christian revelation possessed by the community. Nevertheless all editions retain the argument that man's sense of his own spiritual dignity is the final answer to every system of mechanical naturalism. Laying great stress on John 7:17, he makes this consciousness of ethical power, mastery, activity, the final test of truth in many passages.² Yet this side of his thought nowhere comes to so systematic a development as did his evaluation of the community. It is this pragmatic-ethical criterion by which Ritschl is chiefly known, but it does not profoundly satisfy him. It is apparently too subjective, too relative; he yearns, as do all great spirits, for a truth that is eternal, objective, beyond himself. At bottom he seems to feel that there is nothing in the individual that can be relied on to lead him to

¹ RV, II, 6; *Theologie und Metaphysik*, 55, 74. ² RV, III, 8, 24 f., etc.

the truth. When he seems to approve this "ethical criterion of the truth of the Christian religion," suggested by Spener, he qualifies it at once by the assertion that it can only succeed when worked out from the standpoint of the community of believers.¹

There is still a large body of Ritschl's teachings that does not fit either of the criteria yet discussed. In spite of his well-known rejection of mysticism, there is a noticeable strain of the mystical in his thought. He attacks, it is true, Kaftan's teaching that "the life of the soul hid with Christ in God is the heart of the Christian religion"; but he himself holds that "the fellowship which a Christian may have with God is as close as that between the head and the members of a family."² In explicit contrast to community-life, he says that "in the personal sanctuary of this peculiar knowledge of God, of the world, and one's self, which consists more of states of feeling than of intellectual reflections, one is absolutely independent over against men; or if not, one has not yet attained the enjoyment of reconciliation." Here ultimate religious truth is what is given in an experience of absolute immediacy, and derives its value and its truth from that immediacy.³

To be related with the present criterion is that group of passages, especially in *Theologie und Metaphysik*, that expounds Ritschl's attitude toward philosophy. Here he tells us that metaphysics is not true because it is abstract. Only that which is concrete and particular is true. Phenomena as given in experience are the only reality; facts of consciousness as immediate data are the only soul. There is neither thing-in-itself nor soul-in-itself. But although using Kantian terminology, it is doubtful whether he followed the Kantian arguments. Such at least is Herrmann's opinion. Ritschl's position was here more akin to Comtian positivism than to Kantian criticism; yet, unlike both, it was a consequence of an inner demand for immediacy rather than of a process of reasoning. Such phenomenalism is at bottom mystical.

Later in life he comes more and more to emphasize the feeling element in the highest experience. He says that the feeling of

¹ RV, III, 8.

² RV, III, 94, 617.

³ See J. H. Leuba's hostile criticism of this type of theology in *A Psychological Study of Religion*.

blessedness—"the feeling of joy in eternal life"—is the highest value-concept, which determines everything else.¹ Much of his discussion of the "mastery of the world" moves in the realm of the mystical rather than the ethical. It seems clear that the general trend of his thinking as he grew older was away from the primacy of the will toward the primacy of the emotions, of what satisfies the heart. He did not seem to see that feeling as such is even more subjective than will; nor was he clearly conscious of the clash between the mystical and the social criteria in his own thinking, although he observed it plainly enough in pietists and in other theologians.

We have now found three different criteria of truth implicit in Ritschl's thinking: first, that is true which the community believes; secondly, that is true which satisfies our active ethical nature; and thirdly, that is true which is given in immediate experience. Nowhere does Ritschl fairly attempt to correlate these diverse points of view, although there are traces of an uncomfortable feeling that they are incompatible. For instance, the "Essay on the Conscience" is a frank rejection of the ethical criterion in favor of the community-criterion; and in most passages in which he holds to the latter he qualifies or denies the other two. But he made no attempt to relate the positivism of the immediately given with the metaphysics of the Christian God-in-Himself. However, his tendency in later years toward accepting the pre-existence and present exaltation of the Christ is an implicit recantation of the principle that only the given is real. Further, the criterion of immediacy is plainly inconsistent with the ethical criterion; for (as he himself points out) the latter demands that the *Kosmos* shall be subordinated to the *Ethos*, existence to validity; whereas the immediately given is the *Kosmos* made ultimate.

It is fairly clear that the three criteria do not coincide; that they contradict each other at points; and that Ritschl was in a measure aware of the incongruity. This last fact is one that may afford us to a degree an explanation of the situation. Clearness and accuracy meant much to Ritschl. But they were the clearness and accuracy of a man who demanded religious life and rated it

¹ RV, III, 25.

higher than theological form; who could look on the consistency of a theological system as something purely formal and external; who cared more about being a Christian than about being a conservative or a radical thinker. Now we may apply the term empiricist—in a broad sense—to any man who thus rates experience above theory, content above form. A religious empiricist might naturally be expected to construct a theology which is intended to be confined to the realm of history (although the Christian idea of a personal and transcendent God makes the undertaking impossible), which brings the Kingdom out of the eschatological future and down from the heavenly heights to the earthly present and to the actual ethical struggles of men, and which sees in the concrete given facts of external phenomena and inner feeling the immediate guaranty of the Christian truths. Such a view, expressed in widely varying, often contradictory, formulae, is what we should expect from a theological empiricist.

In a sense, this empiricism was Ritschl's strength and his glory. It gave him a certain freedom of motion, a disregard for the hair-splitting of formal logic, a freshness and reality (of conception, not of expression) in the handling of theological problems in their relation to actual life in the Christian community. It permitted him to be what he became—the teacher of a generation, who inspired thousands and compelled all to reconsider fundamentals, and yet a teacher who had not one submissive disciple.

But precisely the empiricism that was his strength was also his weakness. First of all, it prevented him from understanding the only philosophers to whom he was willing to lend a hearing—Kant and Lotze. Secondly, it closed his eyes to the essential fact of the unity of self-consciousness and of truth as an expression of the attitude of a total personal life over against the world. The Kantian teaching of the activity of the self he accepted; but the unity of the knowing subject he did not grasp. The three criteria, as we have discovered them, illustrate this fact. We know the faith of the community, we will the Kingdom of God, we feel the presence of given phenomena and emotions. But these three facts stand separate, almost unrelated, as could not be the case had Ritschl seen clearly the unity of the thinking, willing, and feeling subject.

For this same reason Ritschl could tolerate a double truth—theoretical and religious—and in his later writings deny any need for relation between the two.

Thirdly, the empiricism which hindered him from recognizing the unity of the self led him to see a unity which is, to say the least, much more hypothetical than the unity of the self; namely, the unity of the social group of the Christian community. Overlooking the fact that the only real beings in that community and its history were the individuals (unless one accepts and justifies the "social mind," as Ritschl did not), he was led to attribute an importance to the idea of the community that seriously hampers the ethical individualism of Christianity. To say that all that the individual receives from God he has through the medium of the community; that his justification and atonement mean simply that he is a member of the community—of that realistic unity which exists "without reference to the counting of its members"; that he cannot be said to be truly a believer in Christ unless he is identified with the church, the worshiping community—is to justify the charge that Ritschl approaches the Roman Catholic conception of the church as the institution through which alone salvation is mediated.

Fourthly, Ritschl's empiricism led him to a doctrine of deism, whereas his Christian training led him to a doctrine of immanence. On the whole, the former conception dominated his thought. Once in the history, and only once, has the transcendent God come into touch with man—namely, in Christ. The development of the Christian community and the realization of the kingdom must be thought, it is true, as caused by God, but the only actual point of contact between God and the history is in the Christ; all else is effect of this cause, inference from this premise. There is very little room for Ritschl to see God in the Old Testament according to his principles; and he flatly refuses to think about the fate of the nations that do not come under the influence of the historical community. Revelation is, then, a fact of the past, a matter of tradition and nothing else, although we gladly call attention to the fact that his empiricism also led him (inconsistently) to recognize the "personal sanctuary." In general, however, for Ritschl, God's

presence in the world is the exception and not the rule; God's existence can be known only by disregarding and overcoming the world, while one accepts the faith of the community. This constitutes a grave limitation of his ability to recognize divine truth in the actual experience of life.

Finally, Ritschl's empiricism led him to another serious limitation, namely, a decided retrenchment of the missionary and evangelistic character of Christianity. He conceived his task as confined within the bounds of the community. The Christian estimate of other religions was purely a matter of mutual understanding among Christians and is not to be thought of as having validity for others. Once in the community, the Ritschlian theology may have a significance for us; but if we stand outside, what then? There is no hope of bringing the Buddhist or Mohammedan to an understanding, much less to an acceptance, of the Christian standpoint. The nations outside the movement of occidental history fare ill in Ritschl's hands. His empiricism could not, or did not, rise to the international and universal point of view.

Ritschl does not give us a satisfactory criterion of religious truth. But he has taught us, as his chief message, the fruitful principle that religious truth is primarily social.